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Adelaide Johnson
A Marriage of Art and Politics

Adelaide Johnson portrait. Photo by Edmonston Studio, Washington,DC.

Photos courtesy National Women's Party, Sewall-Belmont House.

One of the peculiarities of our culture is that artists seldom take an interest in politics, and politicians do not come from the ranks of the artistic community. Occasionally, art and politics blend in one public person. Adelaide Johnson (1859-1955) was an artist who devoted her life's work to the advancement of equality for women and, in doing so, merged her artistic life with a major political concern. The women's movement served as an inspiration for her most monumental works. Her life-size sculptures of prominent suffragists were intended to immortalize the early movement leaders and to convey the sense that what these suffragists did for women was as courageous as the actions of the men who founded the Republic.

Johnson sculpted the busts of many prominent individuals, but she is best known for her marble carvings of leaders in the suffrage movement—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott. At first, she executed individual busts of these three women, but eventually she combined theme into one monumental portrait sculpted from an eight-ton piece of Cararra marble. This work presently sits in the first floor crypt of the nation's Capitol, where it has been for over 70 years.

Adelaide Johnson (left) and Capitol Suffrage Monument, c. 1921.Photo by National Photo Co., Washington,DC.

There are currently plans to move the statue upstairs to the more prominent Rotunda to join the likenesses of other great historic figures. As a result of successful lobbying by the Women's Suffrage Statue Campaign, Congress passed a concurrent resolution intending to move the *Portrait Monument*. Because of logistical difficulties—the size and weight of the statue and its two bases are a total of 13 tons—the move has been delayed. While the date of the move has not yet been set, it is expected soon and will be accompanied by much fanfare.

As an artist, Adelaide Johnson chose a medium in which few women worked on a professional level. The very scale of Johnson's work demands attention. While not media conscious in the sense of an Andy Warhol, she created a public personality. In fact, her unconventional ways often drew more attention than her work.

The artist-as-eccentric was already a fixture in the minds of the public at the beginning of the 20th century. Bohemia was a part of the popular imagination; and the artist, by convention, was expected to be the habitual nonconformist. The flamboyant Johnson did not disappoint her public.

Born on a family farm in Plymouth, Illinois, Sarah Adelaide Johnson was educated in rural schools. No one would have been predicted she would become a world-renowned artist. She began her artistic study at the St. Louis School of Design, where her work earned her a chance to exhibit at the St. Louis Exposition of 1877. There she received two prizes for her wood carvings. Johnson refined her craft with European masters in Dresden, Germany, and Rome, Italy, and began training in sculpture with the prominent Giulio Monteverde and Fabio Altini.

Growing in confidence as a cosmopolitan woman and accomplished artist, she developed a feminist perspective and expressed great interest in spiritualism and vegetarianism, ideas that distinguished her from the crowd. She was not afraid to set her own path. Her commitment to feminism was clearly evident in her work by the early 1890s.

Johnson set up studios and worked in several major cities, including London, New York,

Washington, and Chicago. By 1893, she was exhibiting her work and executing individual busts of the most well-known suffragists at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago intending to place the busts in the United States Capitol. It never happened.

Undeterred, Johnson conceived of an even larger marble carving combining the three pioneer suffragists. For an artist to work with enormously expensive materials and on monumental scale requires risk taking and confidence, an attitude that carried over to her personal life.

At age 36, having established herself as an accomplished artist, she married Alexander Frederick Jenkins, a respected English businessman 11 years her junior. She falsified her age on the marriage certificate, presenting herself as three years younger than she was. Johnson's wedding day serves as an example of both her feminist values and her eccentricity. Presided over by a female minister with the busts of the famous suffragists silently serving as her bride's maids, she declared before the world that she would not be the traditional wife. Indeed, her husband agreed to take her name, pronouncing that his action was, "the tribute love pays to genius." The marriage lasted 12 years before ending in an acrimonious divorce in 1908.

Plans churned in her head to build a museum dedicated to women's struggle for equality as she lost hope that her *Portrait Monument* statute would ever be placed in the U. S. Capitol—especially when Susan B. Anthony opposed the idea in 1904. (Anthony was not fond of Congress. She wanted the statue to go to the Smithsonian Institution.) Through the support of philanthropist and feminist, Alva Belmont, Johnson obtained a commission from the National Woman's Party.

Returning to Carrara, Italy, she had an eight-ton piece of marble quarried and hauled to her studio. Meanwhile, the National Women's Party successfully lobbied Congress to have the statue dedicated at the Capitol on Susan B. Anthony's birthday, February 15, 1921. (The National Women's Party, which runs the Sewall-Belmont museum and archives in Washington, DC, has Johnson's famous individual busts of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott.) Congress gave Johnson a special reception, the first time a women had ever been so honored.

For the feminist movement, this is not an ordinary statue. When it was created by Johnson, women had achieved the vote. The wind had been taken out of the sails of the suffrage movement and the broader women's rights movement. Women were not voting in large numbers and were not seriously courted for their votes. As women's issues received little attention from the public, the suffrage movement seemed to fade away. Johnson's statue and the Party's efforts to have it accepted by Congress briefly provided a rallying point. The symbolism made manifest in this ponderous piece of marble kept the movement alive. It would become the only monument in Washington honoring the women's suffrage movement.

The original inscription placed on the base of the statue by Johnson engendered such a strong negative reaction that members of Congress had it covered with whitewash. Every step of the way the statue has evoked a strong response from one group or another. Its acceptance, the inscription, and now its move to a new location have all been resisted. Still, the support for the monument has prevailed.

The completion of the statue was the high point in Johnson's career. She spent most of the next 35 years of her life struggling to find commissions and to pay the bills. There was a flicker of media attention near the end of her life. On one occasion, she appeared on a television game show. She died at the age of 96 and was buried in Congressional Cemetery in Washington, DC. After more than 40 years, she and her statue continue to engender controversy.

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